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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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2013 VA Budget Under the Microscope

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Two questions dominated today's VA's Budget Request for FY2013 hearing held by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs: When will the Administration make a decision on the question of sequester that may greatly impact funding next year for VA healthcare, and, are requests for additional funding being used appropriately to best serve veterans?

Citing potential funding issues next year under sequestration rules, Chairman Jeff Miller asked of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, "Will there be layoffs? Will maintenance needs be postponed? Will facility activations be delayed? For months, I've been trying to get clarity about what we, as a Committee, and veterans as our constituency, deserve to have resolved."

The Committee requested and received in a matter of days, legal opinions from lawyers from the Congressional Research Service (CRS) and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) on the issue of sequestration and both determined that under current law, VA should be ruled "exempt," prompting Chairman Miller to ask, "So, why has it been 7 months and we have yet to receive an answer from the Administration?"

VA's FY2013 budget request represents a 10.5% increase from its FY2012 budget, with a majority of the additional funding being requested for additional disability compensation payments, however, the budget lacks specificity in certain areas.

Specific budget questions the Committee has for VA on the FY2013 budget include:

- With revised estimates in FY2012 and FY2013 for VA healthcare funding, where were appropriated funds diverted, amounting to more than \$5 billion?
- With hundreds of thousands of veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS), is an additional \$312 million sufficient to meet current and future needs?
- With a surge of veterans expected to return home in the next two years, is VA prepared for the influx of new veterans when VA only allocates 7% of its overall medical care budget for OIF/OEF veterans when homeless veterans receive more than 10%?
- For years, promises of IT and manpower have been made to devote to the disability claims backlog, yet as of January 2012, more than 800,000 veterans are awaiting decisions, 60% of which are 125 days old – an increase of more 100% over the past three years. Will this year's budget finally help turn the corner on the backlog?

"In the end, it is outcomes that really matter," Miller said. "Veterans don't care about numbers; they want their claims decided faster, their health care taken care of, and their aging facilities upgraded. That is the question we need to focus on in this budget."

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